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AUTHOR	Bottoms, Gene
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ABSTRACT

This document describes the High Schools That Work (HSTW) program. HSTW, created by the Southern Regional Education Board, presents a school-reform design that encompasses goals, key practices, and key conditions for setting higher standards and accelerating learning. The HSTW model integrates college-preparatory studies with quality career/technical studies to help high school students prepare for college or the workplace. The HSTW services are tailored to each school's unique needs and are offered on a contractual basis. This document contains a framework designed by HSTW for challenged schools with high percentages of students performing below acceptable standards. The framework contains the following points: key practices for improving student achievement; a recommended curriculum; key conditions for accelerating student achievement; and guidelines for helping students to progress from middle grades to high school, to benefit from a meaningful senior year in high school, and to move from grade 12 to college or the workplace. The remainder of the document contains information on the HSTW program and the responsibilities of schools engaged in the program. (WFA)

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Closing the Achievement Gap: A "High Schools That Work" Design for Challenged Schools.

Gene Bottoms

2003

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HIGH SCHOOLS THAT WORK

SREB

Closing the Achievement Gap:

A *High Schools That Work* Design for Challenged Schools

Is your school making the grade?

Imagine a high school where students, teachers and administrators maintain the status quo — where certain levels of attrition and low achievement are accepted, even expected. A school where low expectations are met with low efforts and where teachers feel that the school would be great if it had different students.

Now imagine a high school where students, teachers and administrators work together to set and achieve high standards and where students are challenged intellectually and engaged fully in the learning process. A school where teachers present the same high-level curriculum to all students. A school where everyone in the education pipeline has a clear mission and a vision for success, and where teachers motivate and challenge students and are encouraged to improve themselves continuously.

Which school do you strive to be?

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) recognizes that teachers and school leaders who are caught up in the daily struggle to keep a school running have no time to develop a whole-school improvement effort. SREB's *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* presents a school-reform design that encompasses goals, key practices and key conditions for setting higher standards and accelerating learning. The *HSTW* model integrates college-preparatory studies with quality career/technical studies to improve students' preparation for work and further study.

High Schools That Work has designed a framework specifically for "challenged" schools with high percentages of students who are performing below acceptable standards. The *HSTW* services are tailored to each school's unique needs and are offered on a contractual basis.

Preparing for a global workplace

In the 21st century, those who stop learning after graduating from high school will have less earning power than high school dropouts had in the 20th century. The startling truth is that success in an information-centered society requires a commitment to lifelong learning. Labor-intensive positions in manufacturing and other fields are declining while high-tech and management positions are increasing. In this decade, 70 percent of the fastest-growing jobs will require an education beyond high school, and 40 percent of all new jobs will require at least an associate's degree.

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Southern Regional Education Board

592 10th St. N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30318
(404) 875-9211
www.sreb.org

Unfortunately, traditional education has not prepared students adequately for higher standards in the workplace. According to a study published in 2001 by The Education Trust Inc., more than a quarter of all students at four-year colleges and nearly half of those at two-year colleges never make it to the sophomore year. As many as half of all students pursuing postsecondary education require remedial courses. **Research has shown that the quality and intensity of the high school curriculum is the most important predictor of success in college.**

Similarly, many high school students who plan to get jobs immediately after graduation are unprepared for the high demands of business and industry. These students need a challenging high school curriculum to help them succeed in life.

There is no "quick fix" to increase student achievement. Dramatic change is a long process that results from thinking "outside the box" and taking small but effective actions over time. It requires school leaders to stop believing that "some students are destined to fail" and instead to embrace the philosophy that, in the right environment and with the right support, most students can learn challenging material. *High Schools That Work* offers schools and school systems a unique opportunity to help students acquire the problem-solving, communication, academic and technical skills they need for further study and the work force.

High Schools That Work

High Schools That Work is the nation's first large-scale effort to engage state, district and school leaders and teachers in partnerships with students, parents and the community to improve the way all high school students are prepared for work and further study. Founded in 1987 by the SREB-State Vocational Education Consortium, *HSTW* began with 28 sites in 13 states. Today, more than 1,100 sites in 26 states take part in *HSTW.*

The *HSTW* program for schools with large numbers of students who are not meeting performance standards has four primary goals:

- to increase the percentage of high school students who perform at the proficient levels in reading, mathematics and science, as measured by the *HSTW* Assessment;
- to increase the percentage of high school students who complete college-preparatory studies in mathematics, science, language arts and social studies and a concentration in an academic area, a career/technical area or a blend of the two;
- to combine the essential content of traditional college-preparatory studies with quality career/technical studies by creating conditions that support school leaders, teachers and counselors in carrying out key practices; and
- to advance state and local policies and leadership initiatives necessary to sustain a continuous school-improvement effort.

Key practices for improving student achievement

SREB has identified the major factors that influence student achievement: high standards and expectations; a challenging curriculum; engaging instruction; personalized learning environments; and strong guidance and advisement programs. These factors provide direction and meaning to comprehensive school improvement and student learning.

- **High expectations** — Schools need to raise expectations and get more students to meet them.

A results-based design for raising student achievement

High Schools That Work is not an education reform plan that "goes through the motions" of school reform. It is based on solid research that shows *HSTW*'s documented success in raising student achievement. The American Institutes for Research selected *HSTW* as the nation's only initiative to reform high schools that shows "strong evidence" of raising student performance.

As participating schools make progress in implementing the components of the comprehensive *HSTW* design, they experience:

- an increase in the proportion of students who meet *HSTW* performance goals in reading, mathematics and science;
- growing confidence by teachers that new instructional methods can enable many more students to succeed in challenging courses;
- rising SAT and ACT scores as more students take these exams;
- improved attendance, graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment;
- decreased dropout rates and discipline referrals; and
- the possibility of receiving state and/or national recognition for their improvement efforts.

- **Career/technical studies** — More students need access to intellectually challenging career/technical studies that emphasize the high-level mathematics, science, language arts and problem-solving skills needed in the modern workplace and in further education.
- **Academic studies** — Academic studies need to teach the essential concepts of the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging students to use academic content and skills to address real-world projects and problems.
- **Program of study** — Each student needs to complete an upgraded academic core and a major. *HSTW* sites that have shown the most improvement over the years eliminated low-level English, mathematics and science classes and raised graduation requirements by switching to a semester block schedule that allows students to complete more credits.
- **Work-based learning** — Students and their parents need to be able to choose a system that integrates school-based and work-based learning. The system should span high school and postsecondary studies and should be planned by educators, employers and employees.
- **Teachers working together** — Teams of teachers from several disciplines should have the time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and career/technical studies. As part of these efforts, reading, writing and speaking should be incorporated into all parts of the curriculum. Academic and career/technical teachers regularly should engage students in reading books and articles, writing, making presentations and using high-level reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Students actively engaged** — Every student needs to be engaged in rigorous, challenging studies and needs to make greater use of research-based instructional strategies and technology in academic and technical studies.
- **Guidance** — Each student and his or her parents need to be involved in a guidance and advisement system that ensures that he or she completes an accelerated program of study with an in-depth academic or career/technical concentration. Each student needs a mentor throughout high school to assist with setting goals, selecting courses, reviewing the student's progress and suggesting appropriate interventions, if necessary.

- **Extra help** — There must be a structured system of extra help to enable academically unprepared students to complete an accelerated program of study with high-level academic and technical content.
- **Useful data** — Student assessment and program evaluation data need to be used to improve continuously the school climate, organization, management, curricula and instruction to advance student learning and to recognize students who meet curriculum and performance goals.

Recommended curriculum

The centerpiece of *HSTW* is a challenging curriculum that focuses on raising academic and technical standards and expectations to prepare students for further education and the workplace. This curriculum requires 28 credits for graduation and contains a college-preparatory academic core and an academic or career concentration.

To complete the recommended curriculum, each student takes:

- at least four English courses with the content and performance standards of college-preparatory English;
- at least four credits in mathematics, including Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II and a higher-level mathematics course, such as trigonometry, statistics, pre-calculus, calculus or the College Board's Pacesetter Mathematics;
- at least three credits in science, including at least three college-preparatory courses, such as biology, chemistry, physics or applied physics, or anatomy/physiology;
- at least three college-preparatory social studies courses;
- at least one course or demonstrated proficiency in computer technology (this course should be taken early in high school so that the student will be able to use technical skills in other classes); and
- at least four credits in a concentration. Each student will have a choice among at least four career/technical concentrations and two academic majors, such as mathematics/science and humanities. Each academic major will include one or two Advanced Placement courses.

The *HSTW*-recommended curriculum focuses on making the senior year more challenging and meaningful for students. Data from the *HSTW* Assessment indicate that taking a mathematics

Comparing Achievement of Students Who Completed the *HSTW*-recommended Curriculum and Those Who Did Not

	Reading	Mathematics	Science
HSTW Goal	279	295	292
Did not complete the *HSTW* curriculum	270	280	280
Completed the *HSTW* curriculum	286	308	294

course in the senior year will help to close the achievement gap in that subject. The recommended curriculum, therefore, includes a high-level mathematics course in the senior year, as well as at least two other academic courses.

Students who receive school credit for jobs are required to have work-based learning plans, and all students must complete senior projects.

Key conditions for accelerating student achievement

High Schools That Work is based on the belief that everyone in the education hierarchy must work together to align policies, resources, initiatives and accountability efforts to support schools as they adapt comprehensive school-improvement designs. Several conditions are fundamental to using *HSTW* to raise student achievement:

- Each district and school needs strong leaders to improve curricula, instruction and student achievement. Each school site should have a leadership team consisting of the principal, the assistant principal and teacher leaders.
- Each school needs a clear mission statement to prepare high school graduates for success in postsecondary education and the workplace.
- School leaders and teachers must be involved in devising ways to achieve the goals and key practices. The school board must be committed to supporting the school and replacing the general track with a more demanding academic core and either academic or career/technical majors.
- District and school leaders must provide teachers with the necessary instructional materials, planning time and professional development for implementing new curricula and research-based instructional methods.
- The school superintendent and the school board need to allow the high school to adopt a flexible schedule that enables students to earn more credits. For example, the block schedule that *HSTW* recommends for challenged schools makes it possible for students to earn 32 credits in four years.

Gains in *HSTW* Assessment scores between 1998 and 2000 at *HSTW* sites with traditional schedules and block schedules

HSTW Assessment tests	Traditional schedule; 20 to 23 credits required (74 schools)	Block schedule; 20 to 23 credits required (72 schools)	Block schedule; 24 to 30 credits required (165 schools)	Block schedule; 24 to 30 credits required; *and* required curriculum of four mathematics and four science credits (19 schools)
Reading gains	0 points	0 points	2 points	6 points
Mathematics gains	3 points	2 points	4 points	7 points
Science gains	2 points	1 point	5 points	7 points

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress-based *HSTW* Assessments, 1998 and 2000

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Transition from the middle grades to high school

Building a strong bridge from the middle grades to high school is the most urgent issue in raising student achievement and keeping students in school. Students must be ready to meet the requirements of a rigorous curriculum when they begin high school. Unprepared students are likely to drop out of school or seek less stringent diploma options. *HSTW* encourages high schools and their feeder middle schools to work cooperatively to ensure that middle grades students are prepared adequately for high school.

There should be a "gearing-up" program, in which middle grades and high school leaders identify seventh- and eighth-graders who need accelerated instruction in mathematics, language arts and reading. Teachers provide students with the extra time and help they need in order to meet standards and readiness indicators, and teachers use instructional techniques that motivate students to work harder.

Schools should provide a four- to six-week summer program to help entering ninth-graders who need further study to succeed in high school. The daily program consists of two hours of reading and writing and two hours of mathematics. Four days a week, students spend two hours using computers to complete reading, writing and mathematics assignments. On the fifth day, students participate in two hours of field trips and other experiences that show the importance of academic studies in the "real world."

Ninth-graders who are not ready for college-preparatory courses in English and Algebra I should have "double doses" of those subjects. There should be a two-semester program available to help these students strengthen their skills.

A meaningful senior year in high school

For many students, the senior year in high school is a time to celebrate or make the "farewell tour" rather than to prepare for an important transition in life. Many students seem to put more effort into the low-skills part-time jobs that earn them spending money than into their ongoing education. School leaders, teachers and counselors should strive to make the senior year a time to get students ready for their next step.

This effort should begin before the senior year. School leaders can work with postsecondary institutions to administer their placement exams to 11th-graders. Leaders can use the results on these exams in working with parents and students to modify the program of study to prepare 12th-graders for postsecondary studies and work.

When students have not taken challenging courses in certain subjects in more than a year, they often struggle in those subjects when they enter college. To make sure that major subjects are fresh in students' minds, schools need to set a goal that all seniors will take at least three academic courses, including a high-level mathematics or science course.

Schools should make an effort to enroll seniors in college-preparatory language arts courses and/or teach the College Board's Pacesetter English to seniors who previously have taken low-level English courses.

Every senior should be required to complete a project that includes a research paper, a product or service, and an oral presentation.

Schools also need to ensure that students have work-based learning plans if they are receiving school credit for work experiences that require them to leave school.

Moving from grade 12 to postsecondary education and/or the workplace

High school graduates are ready to move on to further education or the workplace when they:

- meet *HSTW* performance goals on the *HSTW* Assessment of reading, mathematics and science;
- complete the *HSTW*-recommended academic core and either academic, career or blended concentrations;
- are proficient in written skills, including doing research and organizing and synthesizing information into coherent papers with proper documentation;
- can produce and present oral reports that have been developed logically;
- can work in teams and lead others in learning challenging academic and technical content and skills;
- use time, money, materials and other resources wisely;
- can acquire and evaluate data, organize information, interpret and communicate, and use computers to process information; and
- can select and use appropriate technology to complete assignments in academic and career/technical classrooms.

How progress is measured and reported

HSTW staff members collect and use data from several sources to develop reports that chart schools' progress. *HSTW* consultants share these reports with school leaders to help them develop and revise school improvement plans. The information in the reports shows leaders how recommended improvement strategies are linked to student achievement.

The most important tool that *HSTW* uses to measure schools' and students' improvement is the *HSTW* Assessment. The assessment measures seniors' average achievement in reading, mathematics and science. It shows schools how they are faring on performance indicators and helps them identify areas in which more improvement is needed.

The *HSTW* Assessment includes a survey of the students' high school experiences that addresses what and how they have been taught, what has been expected of them and how much effort they and the school have exerted. The results of this survey show school leaders and teachers the connection between student performance and the quality of classroom experiences.

HSTW also collects useful information from school personnel. Administrators, teachers and counselors at each *HSTW* site participate in a survey that reveals how much time teachers spend working and planning together and what they think of the school climate and the quality of instruction. This survey results in a report that school leaders can use in prioritizing the professional development needs of their staff and in identifying classroom practices that do not improve student achievement.

HSTW also monitors what happens after students graduate and provides high schools with this information. A year after high school, graduates report on how well their high school experiences prepared them for the workplace or for further education. This firsthand information gives the school powerful feedback on how it can improve.

HSTW sites also receive feedback through technical assistance visits by outside teams. Each visit results in a no-nonsense report of actions the school can take to advance student learning.

Curriculum products

HSTW works to improve student achievement by training teachers to use a variety of valid curriculum products that address what and how students are taught.

Pacesetter Mathematics and **Pacesetter English** are part of a College Board program that integrates standards, curriculum, teacher development and assessment. These rigorous senior-year courses are aligned with national standards and state frameworks for content and assessment.

Principles of Technology is a two-year applied physics curriculum that focuses on using physics to solve problems in the "real world" and in the workplace.

Project Lead the Way is a project-based pre-engineering curriculum that allows high school students to explore careers in engineering and engineering technology. When combined with college-preparatory mathematics and science, the four-year program prepares students to enter two- or four-year colleges or technical schools. Courses include Principles of Engineering, Introduction to Engineering Design, Digital Electronics, Engineering Design and Development, and Computer Integrated Manufacturing.

Professional development

While staff and faculty may support school improvement, they may not always know how to implement what is being proposed. For this reason, professional development is critical to the school improvement process. *HSTW* offers site-specific staff development opportunities, and *HSTW* staff and consultants conduct national workshops. All workshops and conferences are aligned with national standards and the schools' improvement plans, and they all address classroom management and motivational strategies. School improvement consultants follow up with participants after workshops to ensure that they are trying and refining their new knowledge and practices.

"Applied Strategies for Mathematics" helps teachers use hands-on strategies and real-world problems to teach students mathematical procedures as well as mathematical concepts and how these concepts relate to the world around them. The workshop includes practical, interesting activities that teachers can use to engage students and make the content relevant.

The **"Project-based Learning"** workshop helps teachers learn how to engage students in complex, real-world problem-solving that is academically rigorous, relevant and empowering. Both the philosophy and practice of project-based learning help students make connections between school and life, find relevance in academics, feel valued and gain deeper understanding of academic and technical concepts. Students engaged in project-based learning take greater responsibility for their learning.

"Cooperative Learning" introduces teachers to the practical skills that will help students better understand concepts while working in groups. Workshop participants learn how to create assignments in which students solve problems, apply the learning to real situations and work together to reach individual and classroom goals. The workshop includes guidelines for setting up and monitoring groups, gauging what students learned in the groups, and preventing typical problems that arise during classroom work.

Because reading and writing are the major tools for learning all subjects, they must be used in every classroom and in every subject. **"Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum"** provides teachers with practical strategies to help students read advanced material and write effectively, to improve students' in-depth learning and mastery of content and to guide the development of school action plans for improving the teaching of reading and writing.

"**Technology Integration in Learning and Teaching**" helps teachers develop rigorous projects and assignments that are connected to technology and that engage students in learning high-level academic and technical content. Teachers learn to develop materials that are aligned to national academic standards, industry content standards and/or technology literacy standards.

"**Integrating Vocational and Academic Education**" provides teachers and school leaders with a framework for ensuring that career/technical students have access to the high-level mathematics, reading and science courses that will prepare them for the workplace. Participants learn how to engage students in applying their academic and technical knowledge in work-related research, design and production of products.

As part of its Leadership Initiative, SREB offers a series of **leadership modules** to help current principals, aspiring principals and teacher leaders develop the skills to plan and implement comprehensive school reform. These learning modules integrate research-based knowledge, theory and practical applications for what school leaders need to know and be able to do to lead successful schools. Module topics include "**Using Data for School Improvement Planning,**" "**Moving Standards Into Curriculum and Instruction**" and "**Leading and Managing Change.**"

What do participating sites agree to do?

HSTW schools are responsible for several actions to help achieve the improvement goals:

- Schools agree to commit the time, personnel and financial resources to enable teachers and leaders to take the steps necessary for changing school and classroom practices and raising student achievement.
- Schools agree to encourage faculty, staff, parents, students and community members to share in a vision of high achievement for all students.
- Each school selects a site leader and develops a leadership team consisting of (at least) the principal and a group of teachers. The members of this team work together to understand clearly the practices that contribute to student success; work with teachers, students, parents and the community to develop a continuous school-improvement process; and provide professional development to help teachers align instructional practices to the school improvement plan.
- Each school adopts a "fast-start" approach. During the first six months of the program, school improvement consultants work with the leadership team to develop an improvement plan and to identify a critical instructional challenge that they can begin to address.
- Each school agrees to send a team to at least one national workshop offered annually by *HSTW.*
- Schools begin implementing action plans to support *HSTW* goals and key practices and to eliminate or reduce dramatically the general education track.
- Each school develops demonstration classrooms. Several lead teachers learn a particular improvement strategy that they implement in their classrooms. These teachers lead small study groups of teachers who are interested in new strategies. Throughout the school improvement program, demonstration classrooms are set up for additional strategies.
- Schools agree to organize teams of academic and career/technical teachers who work with parents and community members in raising student achievement.
- Schools support academic and career/technical teachers with site-focused professional development and encourage these teachers to attend local, state and national workshops, including

the annual *HSTW* Staff Development Conference.

- Schools agree to be active members of state and multistate networks for sharing information and ideas.
- The principal of each school participates in professional development, committee assignments and other activities.
- Schools give teachers the encouragement and flexibility to define problems and to change what and how they teach. Each school ensures that students have access to modern career/technical courses — at either the high school, a career/technical center, a postsecondary institution or work sites organized for learning. The school's site leader must be willing to work closely with employers and two-year postsecondary institutions.

What do school systems agree to do?

Each participating school system agrees to:

- assign a district "coach" to assist each *HSTW* school and to make sure that policies, resources and reform initiatives are aligned fully in ways that sustain changes over time;
- coach and support schools as they make changes;
- have district personnel participate on *HSTW* committees at the school;
- help the school implement *HSTW* key practices;
- promote a vision of high student achievement;
- encourage coordination between the school and its feeder middle grades;
- require staff to give periodic updates on implementation progress; and
- review technical assistance reports to help the school develop improvement plans.

What do states agree to do?

States that have schools participating in *HSTW* agree to:

- allocate discretionary funds for sites' school improvement plans;
- give participating sites access to staff development and materials; and
- foster networking among *HSTW* sites.

What assistance does SREB provide?

SREB provides states, school systems and school sites with leadership, guidance, information and assistance. Several services support this effort.

A *HSTW* consultant conducts an orientation workshop that provides district leaders, school personnel and community members with an overview of the *HSTW* process. The workshop also gives participants the opportunity to ask questions and includes planning for the first year of implementing the program.

Each *HSTW* school is assigned an improvement consultant. This consultant supports the

school's efforts in many ways. He or she helps the school develop an action plan, mentors and coaches the school as it implements improvement activities throughout the project, helps the school determine its professional-development needs, and helps faculty implement the new practices they have learned through professional development.

The consultant helps the principal and teacher leaders develop into effective instructional leaders, helps the school analyze and use assessment data, and provides ongoing training and guidance through workshops, site visits, technical assistance visits, correspondence and conference calls.

SREB arranges for school leaders and teachers to receive training in the use of curriculum products designed to improve student performance.

SREB also recognizes schools' progress; recommends actions for implementing key practices; arranges two-day site-specific workshops that are aligned with the school improvement plans and cover issues such as standards-based curricula and classroom management; and provides materials, publications and newsletters throughout the year.

How will you benefit from being a HSTW *site?*

Everyone wins through *HSTW.*

Benefits to students — *High Schools That Work* improves students' thinking and academic and career/technical knowledge and skills. It shows students the connection between high school and the future and encourages them to prepare for their next goal, which often combines work and further study.

Benefits to teachers — Teachers gain confidence in their ability to help all students complete challenging studies. They work together to create a more rigorous curriculum and to plan professional development activities aimed at raising student achievement.

Benefits to principals — School administrators strengthen their leadership skills as they deal with scheduling, staffing and curriculum-design issues that result from offering a high-quality curriculum to all students. They become more adept at using the incremental planning process — planning, doing, reviewing, making new plans and revising old ones — to improve student learning.

Benefits to schools — Schools receive data about students' strengths and weaknesses in reading, mathematics, science and career/technical studies. Teachers, administrators and community members base action plans on this information. The result is improved communication among the high school, students, parents, employers, and colleges and universities.

Benefits to educational reform — States adopt new long-term strategies for working with local school systems to improve high schools. School leaders and teachers discover that they can raise the achievement of all students, including those who have been underserved.

Benefits to the community and the nation — A challenging program of study raises students' communication, mathematics, science and technical skills; increases their earning potential; and raises the bar of achievement for everyone.

For more information

For information on the *High Schools That Work* urban network and on adapting *HSTW* into the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) project, contact Gene Bottoms, SREB senior vice president and director of *High Schools That Work*. Phone: (404) 875-9211, Ext. 249. Fax: (404) 872-1477. E-mail: gene.bottoms@sreb.org.

For information on the *HSTW* urban network, contact Betty Jo Jordan or Linda Dove at SREB. Phone: (404) 875-9211. Fax: (404) 872-1477. E-mail: bettyjo.jordan@sreb.org or linda.dove@sreb.org.

For information on *HSTW* sites supported through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) project, contact Scott Warren or Beth Smith at SREB. Phone: (404) 875-9211. Fax: (404) 872-1477. E-mail: scott.warren@sreb.org or beth.smith@sreb.org.

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